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SUBJECT: FRENCH UPDATE ON LEBANON, AS THE "THREE MINISTERS"
HEAD TO BEIRUT

REF: STATE 145585

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: France does not believe the October 23 session of the Lebanese parliament will result in the election of a new Lebanese president and sees the visit by French, Italian, and Spanish foreign ministers October 19-20 as a way to remind Lebanese political figures of their responsibility, according to French MFA DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille. This expected failure, he explained, will reinforce France's determination to do whatever it takes to get a president elected before the current presidential term expires, although not necessarily involving an eventual election by a simple majority. Pouille said the ministers will deliver a message about concerns about UNIFIL's continuation if a new president is not elected on time but the main focus will be the election. Central to the ministers' efforts will be shoring up Nabih Berri's position to allow him to act as independently of Syria as possible. France hopes to get the Egyptians and Saudis involved as well. Pouille said French willingness to back the Berri-led process is partly due to March 14 leader Saad Hariri's preference to pursue this path. Meanwhile, Kouchner, as Pouille previewed, telephoned Syrian Foreign Minister Muallim to discuss Lebanon, and the two might meet on the margins of the upcoming Istanbul meeting on Iraq. The French have rewritten the terms of reference for the EU's preliminary mission to assess the proposal to establish a monitoring group along the Lebanese/Syrian border so that it would be less advantageous to the Syrians. End summary

Stuck in a Rut with No Clear Way Out

¶2. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille on October 16 discussed current French perspectives on Lebanon and the impending joint visit by the French, Spanish, and Italian foreign ministers to Beirut. He summarized the current French assessment of the political situation in Lebanon as an endless series of discussions among key political players that shows no sign of real progress toward identifying a consensus presidential candidate. The GOF's expectation, according to Pouille, is that the Lebanese parliament will again not achieve a quorum when it reconvenes October 23 and adjourn to another date closer to the end of current president Emile Lahoud's term in November. With a bit of

cynicism, Pouille allowed as how this was probably the &best outcome8 that could be achieved at the moment.

13. (C) Pouille asserted, however, that another failure to reach a quorum on October 23 will likely reinforce French determination to &do whatever it takes8 to get a president elected before the end of Lahoud,s term on November 24. As he sketched out a mostly familiar worst case scenario if no one was elected, Pouille restated GOF reservations about letting the March 14 majority elect its candidate with a simple majority once the electoral calendar allowed for this.

He imagined a scene in which Lebanese MPs gathered at a heavily fortified Phoenecia Hotel with the U.S., British, and &maybe, just maybe8 the French ambassador present for the election of Nassib Lahoud or some other March 14 candidate. Pouille did not see the UN representative or any Arab ambassadors in this scenario, and his implication was that the knives (or bombs) would be out for whomever was elected as the Lebanese political class argued over the constitutionality of the process.

The October 19-20 Visit to Beirut by the Three Ministers

14. (C) In response to our questions about the October 19-20 visit by the French, Italian, and Spanish foreign ministers to Beirut, Pouille explained that the idea had come from a dinner the three had recently held. Noting that each is a major contributor to UNIFIL, they started to discuss concerns about the high security stakes for their troops in that force if/when the security situation deteriorates following failure to elect a new president. As we had heard from well-informed Lebanese sources in Paris, Pouille described growing worries about the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) splitting along confessional lines or retreating into their barracks. In either case, UNIFIL, whose mandate requires active LAF

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support, would not be able to do its job and be directly exposed should security degenerate. The ministers would, therefore, use the possibility that UNIFIL might have to curtail its operations or pull out to underscore the need for Lebanese political leaders to elect a consensus candidate.

15. (C) Pouille stressed, however, that the visit,s focus was not UNIFIL but the political process. The central reason for the visit was to deliver a strong message to Lebanese political players that the situation is serious, the stakes are high, and each player must act "responsibly." Kouchner was confident, despite differences of opinion over how to deal with Syria, that the three ministers would deliver a single and strong message. Echoing what he said earlier, however, Pouille stated that no one expects or is seeking a breakthrough on October 23 as a consequence of this visit. It would merely sustain the "momentum." We asked whether, with this visit, what had been a French initiative was now being diluted and turned into a European initiative. Pouille acknowledged that possibility but insisted that he believes it important that everyone with any weight vis--vis the Lebanese get involved, and that particularly includes Italy and Spain.

16. (C) In Beirut, the ministers will meet PM Siniora, Saad Hariri, and Nabih Berri along with other key personalities (e.g., the Maronite Patriarch). The meeting with Berri is to include "number 2s" from the different factions (i.e., the la Selle Saint-Cloud crowd minus the late Antoine Ghanem). Pouille dismissed suggestions that such a meeting would occur at Berri's office or residence; the plan was to hold it at the parliament or another neutral location. We expressed concern about the potentially negative optics of this visit and the risk that it would result in pressure on March 14 to make concessions to the opposition. Pouille replied that Saad Hariri, who continues to impress the French, indicated that he was committed to making a good faith effort with Nabih Berri to agree on a consensus candidate. Hariri had

not indicated that he was worried about pressure, and the French noted his firmness on key issues like the Tribunal, UNSCR 1559, and UNSCR 1701. In discussions with President Sarkozy and FM Kouchner, Hariri called for a firm line with Syria, to force it to make a choice over its continued alliance with Iran, and for firm international steps (e.g., establishing the border monitoring mission) to "protect" Lebanon. In exchange, Hariri (who Pouille stated had made clear his ambition to become PM) is prepared to accept a candidate who would not pose a threat to Syria.

Using Hariri to Explain the Continued Emphasis on Berri

17. (C) Pouille was not swayed by arguments that one thing that would concern the USG would be pressure on March 14 to foreswear a vote by simple majority in the last ten days prior to the end of Emile Lahoud's term. In addition to causing Pouille to conjure up another nightmare scenario of what would follow the forced election of someone like Nassib Lahoud, Pouille stressed that Hariri did not raise this possibility with Sarkozy or Kouchner in the absence of agreement on a consensus candidate. He also cautioned against letting March 14 hardliners Samir Ja'Ja, or Walid Junblatt (who Pouille observed would not be in Lebanon for the ministers, visit) dictate the majority position. The bottom line for the French is to preserve whatever slender margin for maneuver Nabih Berri has to press forward with his initiative. He suggested that this was largely due to Hariri's preference to see how far the Berri-led process can go. When we questioned whether Berri had any margin for maneuver, Pouille took the point and indicated that the GOF needed to test his latitude for action. In addition to using Spain and Italy to shore up Berri's position, the GOF is in touch with the Saudis and Egyptians about what they can do. Pouille expressed confidence that the Saudis were on board.

Reengaging with Syria on Lebanon

18. (C) Although the three ministers have no plans to travel to Syria (and special envoy Cousseran has no plans to travel for the moment), Pouille said the GOF is pondering whether to reengage with Syria. Having snubbed Mu'allim in New York following the Ghanem assassination and generally broken off contact with Syria, Kouchner is mulling options to

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reestablish some Lebanon-related dialogue. Two things he might do is meet with Mu'allim on the margins of the Istanbul meeting on Iraq or phone Mu'allim from Paris. (Comment: The Syrian news agency reported, and Kouchner's chief of staff Etienne confirmed to Ambassador Stapleton, that Kouchner and Mu'allim talked about the upcoming mission over the phone October 17. We would imagine a follow-on meeting on the margins of the Istanbul gathering is a real possibility. End comment) Related to this would be an approach to the Iranians that France would make in conjunction with the Saudis.

Moving Ahead on the Lebanon/Syria Border Monitoring Group

19. (C) Turning to the establishment of a monitoring group on the Syrian/Lebanese border, Pouille stated that the EU had met earlier the same day to discuss this project and agreed on the terms of references for the initial visit. These were focused on getting Syrian agreement to certain EU "demands" about the deployment and operation of the group. Pouille claimed the French had rewritten the unacceptable text the Spanish had put forward. After we ran through some specific U.S. concerns (including our preference that the team visit Beirut before Damascus), he answered: "Too late." In terms of the timeline for work on setting up the mission, Pouille indicated it was pretty much as he had previously related, with the initial team going out before the end of this month

and the "factfinding" team to assess how to carry out the mission in November.

¶10. (C) We thanked Pouille for the GOF having finally announced its contribution to the Special Tribunal in conjunction with Hariri,s visit to Paris. Pouille smiled and proudly noted, &yes, for more than six million dollars,8 thus underscoring that France had pledged more than the USG.

A Different Egyptian Perspective

¶11. (C) Egyptian emboff Yahya Odeh on October 17 offered a slightly different take on some of the things Pouille said, especially with respect to France,s efforts in conjunction Egypt and Saudi Arabia. He claimed that Kouchner had tried to convince the Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministers to join the October 19-20 mission to Beirut. They refused in part because they had questions about the wisdom of the visit and in part because they were keenly aware that the relative absence of the Arabs from the main action on this crisis made it difficult for them to associate themselves with a French or European initiative. Odeh further questioned Pouille,s assertion that Egypt or Saudi Arabia agreed or felt that they could do anything as suggested to increase Berri,s room for maneuver and increase his independence from Syria as he seeks a solution to the current crisis. He was not sure about a joint French/Saudi approach to the Iranians on Lebanon, but he understood Saudi FM Sa,ud al-Faisal would visit Tehran soon for discussions entirely focused on Lebanon. As for Hariri, Odeh agreed that the French now judge him critical to the sort of effort France would prefer to identify a consensus candidate. He did not rule out, however, that Hariri could be telling the USG and the French different things as far as what March 14 would do should the Berri-led effort not pan out.

¶12. Comment: French nervousness about the failure of a clearcut presidential frontrunner is palpable. The upcoming visit seems very much an improvised affair and may be as much a French effort to manage the softer line on Syria preferred by Spain and Italy as it is another hastily conceived effort by Kouchner to show that France remains engaged. Whatever is going on that caused Kouchner to pick up the phone and call Mu,allim as well as take his Italian and Spanish buddies to Beirut, however, seems to be based on French conversations with Saad Hariri.

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Stapleton